
Jim Stanford and Leah F. Vosko (Eds.) (2004). *Challenging the Market: The Struggle to Regulate Work and Income*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 416 pages.

As part of the response to the onset of an economic downturn across the advanced capitalist economies that began in the early 1970s, labour market “flexibility” became a catchword used to justify and promote a widespread shift in the social organization of employment. Epitomized in the highly influential 1994 OECD *Jobs Study*, which identified flexibility as the key to promoting competitiveness in the contemporary globalized economy, business leaders and governments advocated “flexibility” as a means to increase productivity, overcome unemployment, and reduce labour costs. At the level of labour market policy, flexibility came to be associated with the U.S. model of labour market deregulation. Proponents of the model advocated for a deregulation of labour markets, reductions in state spending on employment and income security policies, and increased cross-border free trade. Labour market policy in this context shifted from the provision of social security towards the promotion of entrepreneurialism and competitiveness.

Challenging the Market, a collection of essays edited by Jim Stanford and Leah Vosko, explores the character and implications of this form of labour market regulation, and offers both a critique and alternative visions to this economic model. The essays in the text were developed through an International Working Group on Labour Market Regulation and Deregulation that formed in the context of the widespread application of the neoliberal model that operated through York University's Centre for Research on Work and Society. The breadth of the topics covered in the essays is matched by the text's geographic scope. Essays examine themes of neoliberalism, labour market deregulation, and resistance in theoretical and empirical terms, through detailed nationally- and regionally-based case studies that include labour markets in the North and South, from Canada and France to South Africa and Argentina.

The text is divided into several thematic sections, each including its own set of case studies related to the text's overall focus. The first section sets the theoretical and macro-economic context, situating shifts to neoliberal flexibility and deregulation in the context of broader transformations in global capitalism. These first set of essays challenge the philosophical underpinnings of neoliberal policies by critiquing the assumptions of the non-accelerating rate of unemployment (NAIRU), and assertions that economic growth will be achieved

through labour market deregulation. The NAIRU's assumptions are challenged empirically by declining unemployment rates at a time of low inflation (the 1990s) in Canada, the U.S., and Britain. Further, it was expansionary monetary policies, rather than labour market "flexibility", that stimulated growth in the U.S. economy. Rather than structural insecurity, these essays point to the need for demand-side policy solutions to spur productivity and growth.

The following sections focus on the impacts of deregulation and flexibility within a range of national labour markets through the 1980s and 1990s. Though the particularities of the cases vary according to the specific dynamics of the respective labour markets, the results are disturbingly similar.

One common theme is that while the principles of neoliberalism call for a reduction of state intervention in the economy, neoliberal state policies are in fact oriented towards changing the way in which the state intervenes, rather than simply organizing its withdrawal from market activities. What this has meant in practice is that as labour market policy has been reconstructed in a manner that promotes goals of economic competitiveness, neoliberal states have increasingly acted to support capitalist power against the interests of workers. Whether in Russia, where policy makers adopted free market principles in designing the post-Soviet transformation, or in Argentina where neoliberalism was implemented as an alternative to import substitution industrialization, governments have been actively engaged in promoting neoliberalism as a strategy to achieve growth and productivity.

Another common feature of this model was the way in which market-oriented policies contributed directly to profound processes of labour market transformation. Specifically, flexible labour market policies supported a growth in insecure forms of employment, increasing labour market and income polarization, employment instability, new forms of worker control, work intensification, and the erosion of collective agreements and regulatory protections. In this context, it was workers who bore the costs of flexibility. In South Africa, for example, 'regulated flexibility', a strategy to both address the extreme forms of inequality established during the apartheid era, and simultaneously foster competitiveness, ended up undermining minimum labour standards and supporting the spread of labour market insecurity.

Within these working classes, the costs of flexibility were not shared equally, however. As illustrated in a series of Canadian-based studies, inequalities based on gender, race, and age were intensified, as labour market deregulation impacted most profoundly on those groups of workers already most marginalized. Labour market deregulation exacerbated long-established patterns of racialized labour market segmentation. Job creation in workplaces of the so-called 'new economy' - for example call centers - combined insecure employment with feminized labour processes to create marginalized labour forces of women and young workers. Governments, as in the case of

Saskatchewan's NDP government of the mid-1990s, failed to construct labour standards that provide effective protections for these emerging sites of employment.

Challenging the Market constructs a systematic and well-substantiated critique of the neoliberal model of labour market regulation. The book does not end solely with critique, however, as the authors are also intent upon advancing and promoting alternative models of regulating work and income. Essays that propose alternatives to the neoliberal model suggest employment practices that promote a more equitable distribution of working time, such as France's 35 hour work week, or mechanisms to ensure effective monitoring and enforcement of labour standards codes. The case studies indicate quite clearly that alternatives will not be granted through the good will of governments. Rather, they will only come about through struggles for workers' rights that challenge neoliberal policies and corporate restructuring, such as those undertaken through the U.S. living wage movement or the growing movements for stronger labour standards. Nor will social transformation be secured through traditional models of labour organizing. The Justice For Janitors movement in Los Angeles, and the recent organizing efforts of the Central of Argentinean workers provide key examples of the ways in which labour organizations are seeking to expand the bounds of traditional workplace-based models through community-based strategies, a wide-variety of activist techniques, and efforts to reach out to groups of workers who have historically been excluded by or marginalized within labour movements, including women, immigrant workers, and the unemployed.

While the case studies in the text encompass a wide geographic range, the focus of each case is very much oriented to the level of individual nation-states. This focus clearly indicates that national specificity, and the power of individual nation-states, even in this age of globalization, still matter. However, many of the competitive pressures that are examined in the specific case studies are also related to global and/or transnational social processes and institutions. Global processes are referenced in case studies throughout the text, for example, global competition in the garment industry that led to the restructuring of Quebec's decree system, the widespread promotion of neoliberalism through international organizations such as the OECD, and processes of migration and racialization that have intensified labour market segmentation. The nationally-specific focus of the cases could have been nicely supplemented with an essay that developed a global perspective, particularly in the first section of the text, which, while intending to frame the overall macro-economic context, is heavily focused on labour markets in Western Europe and North America.

Nonetheless, the overarching challenge is clear: while current forms of labour market deregulation and flexibility clearly prioritize corporate interests, worker and community-oriented models should be considered imperative, not

utopian. It is this point that drives the movements that are leading the struggle to regulate work and income.

Mark Thomas
Department of Sociology,
York University,
Toronto, Canada